

THE HUDSON RIVER WATERFRONT WALKWAY: PROVIDING PUBLIC ACCESS AND RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES ALONG A HIGHLY DEVELOPED URBAN WATERFRONT

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INTRODUCTION

Mention the words ‘coastal recreation and tourism’ and visions come to mind of warm sunny beaches where people wearing stylish summer sportswear are swimming, surfing, relaxing, sunbathing, and investigating odd life forms in tidal pools. New Jersey offers residents and visitors many such idyllic locations and experiences, but portions of the state’s waterfront are a highly developed urban landscape. However, this type of coastline also offers extensive and exciting opportunities for recreation and tourism. With more than 1,100 people per square mile, New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the Union. Much of this population resides in the northeast portion of the state where development pressures are intense, especially along the waterfront. Fulfilling the duties as required by the Public Trust Doctrine of preserving and protecting public access to trust lands, waters, and resources in this urban setting can be a significant challenge for the state’s planners and lawmakers. The Hudson River Waterfront Walkway (Walkway), a waterfront corridor spanning nine municipalities and providing recreational opportunities for the public, balances the interests of economic development along a thriving waterfront with the public’s right to recreational opportunities along tidal waters.

EVOLUTION OF THE PUBLIC TRUST DOCTRINE

The Public Trust Doctrine establishes and protects the rights of the public to enjoy public trust lands, water, and living resources. Under the Public Trust Doctrine, it is each State’s responsibility and duty to preserve and regulate access and enjoyment of the lands, waters, and resources by devoting them to public uses. Historically, the Public Trust Doctrine protected uses related to navigation, commerce, and fishing. And while these uses are still preserved, the inherent flexibility of the doctrine has allowed states to broaden the Public Trust Doctrine rights to include specific recreational uses such as swimming, bathing, surfing, hiking, skating, and other activities which contribute to the public’s complete enjoyment of trust lands. As the public’s needs and desires for additional recreational opportunities evolve, so too will the Public Trust Doctrine to preserve and protect the uses of the natural water resources and the lands that border them.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE HUDSON RIVER WATERFRONT WALKWAY

In part to provide New Jersey residents and visitors to the state access to the Hudson River waterfront, the state’s Coastal Zone Management Rules (N.J.A.C. 7:7E) established specific criteria for development along the Hudson River Waterfront Area including the

creation of the Hudson River Waterfront Walkway. This Walkway will be an 18.5-mile long urban waterfront corridor connecting the George Washington Bridge in Fort Lee with the Bayonne Bridge in Bayonne. Nearly completed, the Walkway offers residents and visitors spectacular views of the Statue of Liberty, the New York City skyline, Ellis Island, and the Hudson River. See Figure 1.

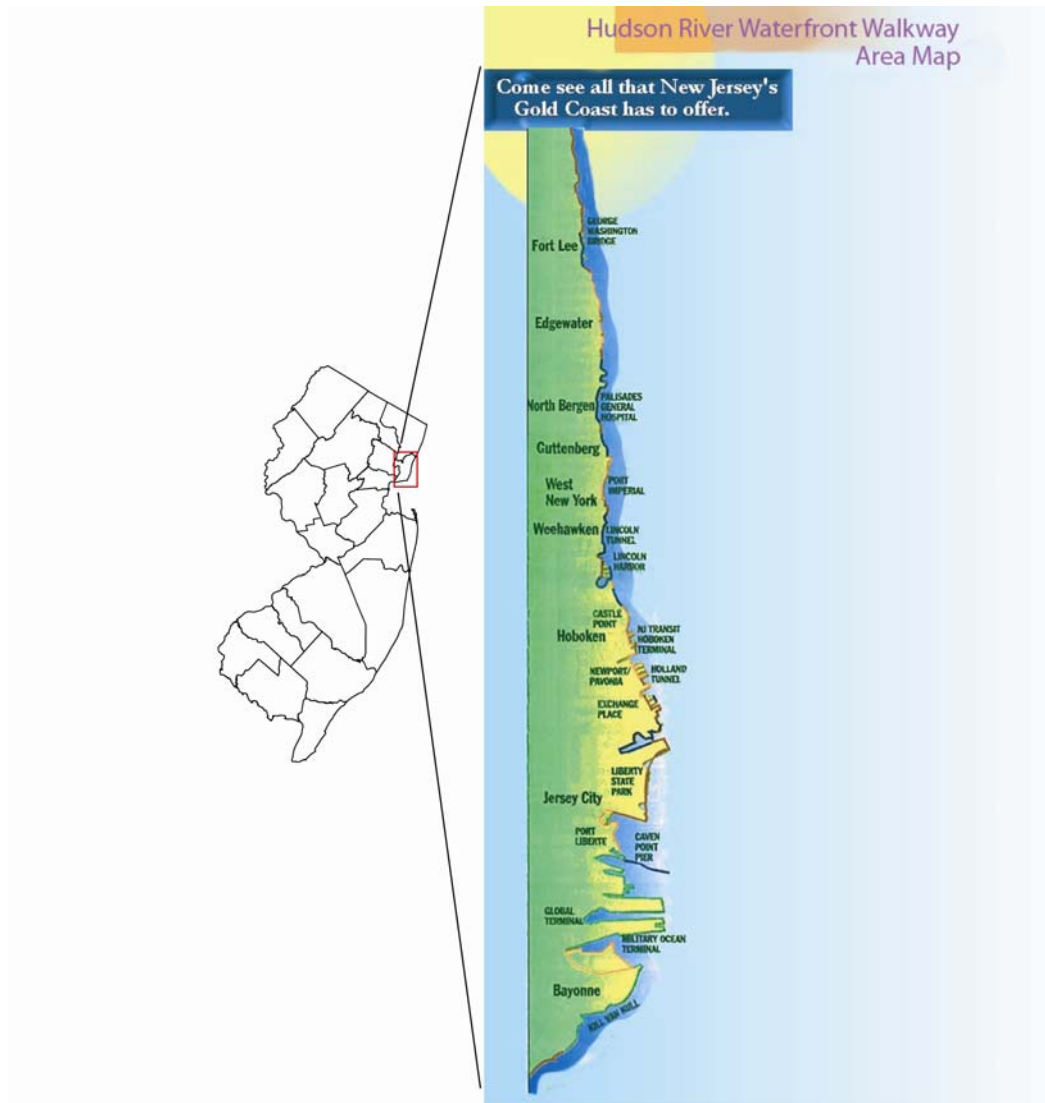


Figure 1: Hudson River Waterfront Walkway Area Map

Each new development in the area is required by law to construct and maintain a segment of the walkway “coincident with the shoreline of the development” (N.J.A.C. 7:7E-3.48(e)) according to established design guidelines and standards. The rules require that unrestricted public access be provided for recreational use of the walkway. The Hudson Waterfront Walkway Plan and Design Guidelines (1984) were written to assist NJDEP permit reviewers, developers, and local officials in determining appropriate and adequate

public access to the Hudson River Waterfront. The Guidelines specify requirements for bicycle access, preservation of views of the waterfront, and development of parks and plazas. Trails and scenic overlooks are encouraged. The Guidelines also suggest that in designing the walkway, emphasis should be placed on creating linkages to special points of interest, historic sites, and existing parks and recreational areas and trails. The Design Guidelines urge special consideration of the differences in speed and continuity of movement, typical trip length, degree of control, and vulnerability to collision with others when designing the Walkway for the principal classes of users, including pedestrians, cyclists, wheelchair users, skaters, and even wheeled vendors. The Hudson River Walkway Design Standards (1988) specify paving requirements for safe cycling and other outdoor recreational activities.

CURRENT RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Visitors to the Walkway engage in a variety of recreational activities including walking, running, biking, sightseeing, and fishing. During the warmer months, people working at commercial and business offices and facilities can be found enjoying a leisurely lunch outside on some of the many benches placed along the Walkway. Children and adults play volleyball and other games at Frank Sinatra Park and additional open green spaces constructed as part of the walkway landscape. Recreational fishermen vie for prime fishing spots at piers and at specific locations along the walkway. Fish cleaning stations, such as those in place on the walkway in Hoboken, encourage environmentally responsible behavior allowing fishermen to prepare their catch without degrading water quality. Joggers, runners, and cyclists use the Walkway to exercise and even commute, avoiding the traffic congestion often found on the busy streets adjacent to the Walkway. Some small beaches have been created which afford the opportunity for swimming and wading in the river. And, a kayak rental facility at Frank Sinatra Park offers yet another means of enjoying the water resources.

People are drawn to the waterfront and the open space, views, and community feel of the walkway area. The municipalities adjacent to the walkway take advantage of this attraction and encourage visits to the waterfront by sponsoring festivities throughout the year. Jersey City sponsors the Annual Irish Festival, and Hoboken hosts numerous events at Frank Sinatra Park including Shakespeare in the Park, the Puerto Rican Cultural Festival, the Italian Festival, and an autumn Harvest Festival. The City of Weehawken, having realized the socio-economic benefits of having a focal point for community activities and wanting to exploit its own proximity to the waterfront, has applied for permits for the creation of a new waterfront park. Also in Jersey City, at Exchange Place, a statue commemorates the Katyn Massacre in Poland and a memorial event takes place annually. By offering such activities municipalities gain economic rewards while their residents enjoy recreational opportunities and a sharing of a sense of community, belonging, and ownership of the surrounding water and landscape.

EXPANDING RECREATIONAL USES OF THE WALKWAY

Residents, visitors, city planners, private businesses, and several other organizations appreciate the benefits of the Hudson River Waterfront Walkway and the many recreational uses it currently affords. Several of them recognize that further advantage of

the Walkway can be taken to expand these uses and make the existing Walkway part of a more extensive system of recreational trails and corridors.

The East Coast Greenway, a 2600-mile off-road trail system connecting the cities of the eastern seaboard, is being created by connecting local trails to form a continuous route. It is an urban pathway for walkers, cyclists, skaters, skiers, equestrians and persons with disabilities. The New Jersey section of the Greenway will extend 92 miles passing through urban and rural areas between Pennsylvania and New York. On November 12, 2004 the East Coast Greenway Association Board of Trustees approved a half-mile section of the Walkway as part of the route. From this section, users can take a ferry to Manhattan and continue on the East Coast Greenway in New York.

Another trail project is underway in New Jersey whose goal is to create a continuous corridor from Liberty State Park adjacent to the Hudson River to the Delaware Water Gap along the Pennsylvania border. This trail currently utilizes the Walkway from Liberty State Park to Jersey City where it then continues through the city and then across the state. Mostly, this trail caters to pedestrians; however, sections are also bicycle accessible.

WORKING TOWARDS WALKWAY COMPLETION AND ELIMINATING BARRIERS TO USE AND ENJOYMENT

The intent of the walkway is to provide public access and enable and encourage recreational activities along the Hudson River shoreline. In order to do so, many agencies and organizations including state and local government, non-profit organizations, developers, and consultants have to coordinate efforts to integrate all the relevant design elements including the walkway surface, landscape, safety and security, access points, parking, amenities such as benches and light fixtures, and creating an acceptable interface between private and public spaces. Some work remains to be done to complete the Walkway. "Gap sites"- sections of Walkway that have either not yet been built, are active or contaminated former industrial sites, or which due to inadequate maintenance do not fulfill the needs of users - exist at certain intervals along the Walkway. These gap sites prevent seamless travel along the Walkway and users often have to detour to an adjacent roadway sometimes adding miles to the route and compromising safety. Parking is not always available near an access point to the Walkway. Additional links to public transportation would entice users with limited means of travel to visit the Walkway and enjoy the recreational opportunities available. In addition, there is inadequate signage along the Walkway guiding prospective users to access points, areas of interest, or local public transportation options. Some signs that do exist are incorrect or misleading. Appropriate and enforced maintenance and repair guidelines would improve the overall aesthetic appeal, safety, and usability of the walkway. Additional improvements include installation of public restrooms, water fountains, and other amenities for comfort during extended visits to the Walkway and adjacent parks. All of the agencies and organizations involved in the creation and implementation of the Walkway must continue to coordinate efforts to complete, improve, and build upon their many successes to enhance the recreational value of the walkway.

CONCLUSION

The development of the Walkway not only fulfills the requirements of the Public Trust Doctrine to preserve access to trust lands but has also created a place that is attractive, suitable for many uses, pedestrian and bicycle friendly, and lively and enticing to visitors. It has improved the quality of life for residents and visitors by encouraging economic and community well being, connecting people to their local land and water environment, linking coastal and inland recreational sites, and promoting the character, history, and culture of the area. This part of New Jersey is highly urbanized and developed, but the Walkway ensures a connection to the local environment and the community through the availability of access and recreational opportunities along the river landscape.

SOURCES

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